

THE ANDROGYNY OF AN ANGEL:  
DEATH AS LIBERATOR IN GEORGE SAND'S *GABRIEL*

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## ABSTRACT

George Sand's play *Gabriel* illuminates the view that gender is both constructed and essential. Sand's eponymous heroine was born an aristocratic female but is raised as a Renaissance prince in conjunction with the wishes of her despotic and paternalistic grandfather, Prince Bramante. Under the guise of doing what is politically appropriate to adhere to the laws of primogeniture, Bramante, via a preceptor, educates Gabriel in a traditional male fashion, introduces her to masculine forms of recreation and inculcates within her the belief that she is male. However, Gabriel's physical sex is revealed to her in a dream. After she acknowledges that biologically she is female, she performs as both a man and a woman and can be codified as an androgyne.

It is no coincidence that Sand's dramatic heroine takes her name from the angel Gabriel. I argue that Gabriel's androgynous nature is equivocal to the androgyny of angels and sublimates her to a cherubic status. As an androgyne, Gabriel cannot exist within her milieu autonomously. As an ethereal being, she is not at home in the physical world and must return to the heavens. Gabriel must embrace death as the liberating vehicle which will remove her from an isolated, liminal state and take her to a realm wherein she will be met with acceptance and exist harmoniously and autonomously.

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## DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my dear friends, Janet Carey, Shannon De Antonio, Rosalida Medina, Tammy Arnold, Maura Kropke, and Kristin Phaupe whom have all inspired my faith in the power of women.

O what a great miracle it is  
that into a submissive feminine form  
entered the king . . .  
And O what great felicity is  
in this form,  
for malice,  
which flowed from woman –  
woman thereafter rubbed out,  
and built  
all the sweetest fragrance of the virtues,  
and embellished heaven  
more than she formerly troubled earth.

--St. Hildegard of Bingen<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

Much like the “fantastically vampish yet androgynous” George Sand, her 1839 play *Gabriel* evokes questions concerning gender, identity, and liberty, and redefines traditional notions of masculinity and femininity (Jack 3). Sand is well known not only for her prolific writing, but for her cross-dressing, flamboyant persona, and Bohemian life style. *Gabriel* is a fantastical drama replete with intrigue surrounding the eponymous heroine who is born a female but is raised as a Renaissance prince in conjunction with the scheme of her paternalistic grandfather, the despotic Prince Bramante. Given Sand’s popular characterization, it is not surprising that what little criticism there is regarding *Gabriel* focuses on the theme of transvestism. In *Gender in the Fiction of George Sand*, Françoise Massardier-Kenney asserts that Gabriel’s cross-dressing is a manifestation of patriarchal power and an injunction against sexual desire (128-29). While Massardier-Kenney’s observation is certainly accurate, and albeit that cross-dressing is inherent in *Gabriel*, I believe that one must look beyond the masquerade and examine themes of a more metaphorical, psychoanalytic, symbolic, ethereal, and mystical nature to appreciate

Sand's thought-provoking drama more fully. It is easy to read the author's cross-dressing, love of horse riding, and androgyny into *Gabriel*, but the play lends itself to complex textual analysis as well.

Scholars agree that *Gabriel* can be considered a dialogic novel, a hybrid between novel and play. Gay Manifold, translator and composer of the Introduction in the English version of *Gabriel*, notes that Sand's drama is considered more of a novel than a play (Introduction xii), while Massardier-Kenney holds that the hybridity of Sand's work lies in it being "neither a novel nor a play" (128). Even so, for the purpose of clarity and given that the work is written in dialogue form, in the following pages I will call *Gabriel* a drama. *Gabriel* was never publicly produced on the stage even though performers and directors with venues such as the Comédie Française and the Odéon expressed an interest in doing so (Manifold 79, 88).<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the mid-nineteenth-century French public was just not ready to partake in what Sand deemed a five-hour "cloak and dagger melodrama with twelve beautiful scenes" (qtd. in Manifold 79). And perhaps it is because of its hybrid form that *Gabriel* is one of the most understudied texts in the Sandian corpus. In *George Sand and Idealism*, Naomi Schor mentions *Gabriel* only once in a brief statement confined to a single paragraph. There is also a paucity of commentary in regard to *Gabriel* in Isabelle Hoog Naginski's *George Sand: Writing for her Life*. Curtis Cate's *George Sand: A Biography* merely remarks that *Gabriel* is a melodramatic "vehicle for airing feminist convictions" (478). Yet I want to argue that the text's themes and concerns are as complex as its dialogic form.

Sand's drama complicates commonplace perceptions of sex and gender by suggesting that gender is both constructed and essential; for although in this world people

are codified as either masculine or feminine, Gabriel performs as both a man and a woman. Furthermore, the titular heroine exemplifies an ethereal being; she is a creature who is not at home in the physical world. Sand herself claims that “*Gabriel* belongs to pure fantasy, in form and subject” (*Gabriel* 1). In her Author’s Notice to *Gabriel*, Sand announces her desire to explore something other than “the concrete world” (1).

According to Sandian scholar Albert Smith, Sand’s theatrical works contain elements of fantasy which stem from her “esprit engagé,” her engaged spirit. Sand’s spirit is also recognized by Jack who believes Sand’s novels and theatrical works illuminate an inner life sated with “feelings and fantasy” (Prologue xiii).

In her Foreword to *George Sand: Collected Essays*, scholar Janis Glasgow claims the author can be recognized for her “artistic creativity” (Foreword ix). As a creator of fiction, and an inventor and promoter of flights of the mind, Sand in this particular work conceives an angelic androgyne whose plight still resonates in contemporary society. The title suggests a cherubic heroine who may not be peripatetic, but who perhaps travels through the use of downy, wafting wings. Who is Gabriel? Is she an androgyne whose marginal and innovative persona stifles any chance she has at making the physical world her home? Is she merely a woman whose essential nature clashes with her constructed gender to such a degree that she cannot continue with life, or is she a celestial being caught by the hand of Sand herself while chasing fancy? In the following pages, I argue that the heroine is a character of mythological proportion in that she meets the criteria of an androgyne who is not at home within her milieu and must depart from the physical world in order to achieve autonomy. I assert that Gabriel belongs to the imaginative realm of angels, an atemporal sphere wherein this unique figure can transcend sexual



difference and find freedom from the oppression of male dominance and gender-coded behavior.

Though Sand biographers Donna Dickenson and Belinda Jack have argued that Gabriel is a princess raised as a boy by “mistake” who evolves into a very worthy prince, I believe that there is no “mistake” about Gabriel’s upbringing—she is raised as a male quite deliberately.<sup>3</sup> Adhering to Salic Law which decrees that an inheritance can only pass to a male, Gabriel’s grandfather inculcates within her via her preceptor, the Abbe, the belief that she is male in order to comply with the laws of primogeniture.<sup>4</sup> Gabriel’s cousin, Astolphe, is the sole male presumptive; however, being the progeny of Bramante’s younger and less favored son coupled with the fact that he is a profligate youth, deems him an unsuitable candidate for accession to the title. More importantly, Bramante’s decision to rear Gabriel as a prince stems from his desire to defend his masculinity and to hide the fact that he sired a male child who did not possess the fortitude to take over the throne. Keeping the fortune in the family is his secondary motive for pretending to the world that his granddaughter is male. Bramante hopes that Gabriel “has more energy” than her ailing father who was unable to bring forth an heir so that his name will not be disgraced while he is still alive (Prologue.2, 3). According to Anne E. McCall in “George Sand and the Genealogy of Terror,” through Gabriel’s birth, an unspecified Bramante family illness is confirmed and the only way for her to rule is through “gender imposture” (39). Given the fact that Gabriel’s true sex must remain a secret, there is little to no chance she will openly produce an heir. Bramante has no concern for what will become of his lineage after his passing; he is only interested in how society perceives him while he is still alive.

As part of her tutelage, Gabriel engages in academic studies and is encouraged to view women as inferior beings, abject objects, and creatures born into servitude. Despite Bramante's attempts to create Gabriel a "he," the female prince is innately aware of her biological sex which is revealed to her in a dream. Upon the realization that she is indeed a woman and not a man, Gabriel does not abandon her masculine activities nor does she modify her boyish conduct, continuing to enjoy a masculine lifestyle. Even so, she embarks on a quest to expose her cousin Astolphe as the proper heir to the Bramante fortune, but, upon falling in love with him, she allows the role of a woman to be imposed upon her. However, regardless of her biological sex and Astolphe's wishes, Gabriel desires to act paradoxically as both a man and a woman; dueling, roaming the countryside, and taking on the role of a loving wife to her husband.

It is currently de rigueur to recognize that "sex" refers to the biological make up of an individual, and that "gender" is a social or cultural construct. Yet Sand's heroine complicates this notion. Gabriel's persona is neither exclusively masculine nor feminine; rather, she exhibits a melded sex. Gabriel's gender, both constructed and innate, classifies her as an androgyne. Within the female prince exists an androgyny that "surpass[es] the [. . .] dualities of masculinity and femininity toward a fluid, integrated wholeness" (Cook 23). In "Deceiving Disclosures: Androgyny and George Sand's *Gabriel*," Pratima Prasad questions Gabriel's gender allegiance and finds her gender identification to shift. I find no evidence to support the idea that Gabriel pledges allegiance to one gender over the other, and instead of a bifurcated gender or a gender that only juxtaposes masculinity with femininity, I find Gabriel to possess a perfectly blended one. She does not merely oscillate between gender roles; she exhibits a

syndicated masculine and feminine persona. In the spirit of Sandian fantasy, I concur with Manifold who proposes that Gabriel exists in “an alien third gender something like the androgyny of an angel” (*Gabriel* Introduction xi).<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, angels are not at home in the physical world and must return to the heavens in order to survive.

Gabriel is stripped of virtually all control over her own destiny. At the age of seventeen when she encounters Prince Bramante for the first time in ten years, her octogenarian grandfather delivers an ultimatum that places her in a dilemma. She has the choice to live as a prince, but in celibacy lest an intimate relationship expose her as a fraud, or to be cloistered in a convent. Both options will leave her devoid of sexual liberty. Alternatively, she can justly expose Astolphe as the rightful heir, relinquish her fortune to him, and become his subject by completely assuming womanhood. To alter her lifestyle to comply solely with the feminine role would surely weigh heavily on the female prince. In “Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body,” feminist theorist Susan Bordo explains that for a woman to assume complete femininity she must undergo a drastic change and transform her manner of dress, her personal habits, her daily routine, and her way of thinking. These conversions are extreme and such “practices of femininity may lead [. . .] to utter demoralization, debilitation and death” (2363). They certainly would in Gabriel’s case. Given her hybrid gender, it is not surprising—if demoralizing—that Gabriel would find death appealing, and eventually decide to kill herself.

What leads to Gabriel’s death is her belief in the parity of women and men and her unwillingness to commit to the performance of only one culturally constructed gender role. Gabriel states, “I don’t feel my soul is one sex or the other” (Prologue.3).

Psychological deception infuses Gabriel with masculinity, her anatomy is female, and she believes herself to be an amalgamation of the two. Her lover and her grandfather refuse to accept her unique gender and offer her only the choices of being enshrouded in a fraudulent identity, being cloistered away, or submitting to the confines of woman. Oppressed and isolated, Gabriel threatens suicide out of despondency and a desire for revenge. Her death will guarantee the rightful heir his fortune as well as undermine Bramante. Yet Gabriel is not even at liberty to take her own life; a murderer hired by her grandfather delivers the fatal wound. Even so, parting words illuminate her belief that she will find autonomy via death: "Give me that freedom, my God! My soul swells up merely to pronounce that word: freedom" (5.8). Interestingly, she is left for dead lying near a statue of an angel on the Sant'Angelo bridge, the same bridge Beatrice Cenci crossed before liberation from her patriarchal oppressor via her execution in front of the Castle Sant'Angelo more than two centuries before.<sup>6</sup> Gabriel's secret is carried with her to the tomb leaving her patriarchal oppressors victorious while her spirit soars towards the heavens, the only realm wherein this seraphic androgyne can exist in harmony.

## I.

### THE CONSTRUCTIONIST AGENDA: EMBODIMENT OF THE MASCULINE ROLE

And it came about when I . . . had seen the vision,  
[of the angel Gabriel] that I sought to understand it;  
and behold, standing before me was one who  
looked like a man.

--Daniel 8:15<sup>7</sup>

Judith Butler begins her pioneering study *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* with the question "How and where does the construction of gender take place?" (11). A century and a half earlier, George Sand explored this issue in her

drama, *Gabriel*. By way of contemporary theory and psychoanalysis, I will examine the construction of Gabriel's masculinity within this section. The construction of the heroine's masculine gender takes place under the patriarchal hand of Bramante and within the confines of pedagogy. Sand's drama does not elucidate the extent of the lives of Gabriel's parents after her birth. In view of the fact that the secret of Gabriel's sex resides solely with the nurse who helps deliver her, the Abbe, her servant Marc, and Prince Bramante, I find it safe to presume that her parents' life span after her arrival into the world was fleeting. Bramante believes he possesses the power to determine the gender of his granddaughter under the guise of doing what is politically appropriate. Acting not only as a ruler of a kingdom, but also as an omnipotent creator, he plots the clandestine construction of Gabriel as a male. The Abbe's declaration echoes Bramante's decree: "Since his earliest childhood [Gabriel] has been imbued with the grandeur of the masculine role" (Prologue.2). Via the instruction of her preceptor, the Abbe, the "masculine role" is intromitted into the mind of Gabriel in an attempt to alienate her from her female sex.

Pratima Prasad holds that it is Bramante's constructionist agenda that allows misogynistic pedagogy to permeate Gabriel's upbringing (336). We can assume that even though her grandfather did not take an active role in her upbringing that the Abbe educates her in conjunction with Bramante's scheme. Devoid of a mother figure, Gabriel's development took place in an exclusively masculine atmosphere. At the beginning of the drama when Gabriel is seventeen years old, the aging Bramante decides to open his "paternal heart" and exercise his patriarchal authority so that his memory and his "proud name" will not be dishonored (Prologue.2). Bramante's desire to preserve the

integrity of his name and his paternalistic and oppressive notions in regard to his granddaughter impose upon her a mode of upbringing which places her under direct patriarchal control.

Patriarchy, according to the feminist theory of Adrienne Rich in *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, is

the power of the fathers: a familial-social, ideological, political system in which men--by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law, and language, customs, etiquette, education, and the division of labor, determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male (57).

Sand's drama and Bramante's system of power within it exemplifies Rich's definition of patriarchy. In the spirit of a self-serving tradition, Bramante utilizes Salic Law as a vehicle to impose masculine ritual and a traditional masculine education upon Gabriel. He exercises his paternalistic authority as well as his political power to create Gabriel the sole male heir apparent. Bramante defines and delineates Gabriel's role as a prince.

Bramante's political and patriarchal supremacy creates a sphere of power that envelopes Gabriel and in which she is objectified as a commodity. Bramante retains a political and economic interest in his granddaughter as she functions as the vehicle through which his fortune and principality will remain under his direct control throughout his life. According to feminist critic Luce Irigaray in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, a commodity shares in "the cult of the father" and never ceases to resemble or copy its representative (178). To Bramante, Gabriel is nothing more than an exploitable article of commerce, a utilitarian article, an empty vessel he can fill with masculine ideology and

the valorization of patriarchal power. It does not concern Bramante that Gabriel is his own flesh and blood. To him, she is a minion enveloped in his authority.

Unable to cross beyond the perimeter of Bramante's arena of authority, Gabriel is subject to its manipulative sway. The boundaries that define her subjection are established for her prior to emergent literacy and intellectual cognition. The developmental theories of psychoanalyst and critic Nancy Chodorow illuminate the impasse imposed upon Gabriel since childhood. Chodorow, who believes gender is both constructed and essential, asserts that an emotional signaling occurs between an infant and its caregiver in which meaning is transferred to objects via communication between the infant and caregiver. Personal meaning for the infant begins at this stage and may come from language, or from other nonverbal, nonlinguistic forms of communication (57-58). In view of Chodorow's theory, by exposing Gabriel to masculine activities at an emergent phase in her life, and by deferring contact with females as well as all things feminine, her caretakers ensure that she can have no comprehension of a culture inclusive of female participation. Lacking a mother figure and all forms and forces of femininity whatsoever, Gabriel's nascent mind cannot conjure up images of women or femininity. According to Chodorow, "An inner world is [thus] built up in the child's unconscious mind" (54). In this specific case, this inner world is constructed via impressions derived from activities prescribed by Bramante that are instituted specifically to edify Gabriel in masculine ideology.

Referring to Klienian theory, Chodorow posits that children use particular toys and engage in certain forms of recreation "for individually specific emotional and symbolic ends" (20). Inculcated in Gabriel is the belief that she is male, but she does not

possess a penis; therefore, a “symbolic system” is implemented to achieve this end. By performing as a male while utilizing masculine objects such as swords and pistols which function as vehicles of construction, Gabriel appears to have a phallus as the objects possess the metaphoric value of a penis.<sup>8</sup> During childhood, Gabriel is not aware of the fact that males have penises because as a child, she is taught to fence and handle a shaft in such a fashion that she does not notice the absence of a protuberant object. Through repetitive play with masculine objects, the notion that she is male is reinforced in Gabriel’s mind and her masculine performance is solidified. The paradigms that shape Gabriel’s identity are actually embodied by her through a phenomenon wherein motor habits manifest themselves cognitively.

Again, Sand’s creation anticipates the insights of twentieth-century theorists. In “The Challenge of Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology of Embodiment for Cognitive Science,” philosophers Hubert L. Dreyfus and Stuart E. Dreyfus lay out ways in which individuals synthesize instructional maxims and cognitively embody them. Dreyfus and Dreyfus posit that through motor habits, the body, as a medium, adapts literal meaning from figurative meaning (104). During Gabriel’s “novice” stage she is taught to fence and hunt. She is instructed to handle swords and to fire pistols. Via her preceptor, she is apprised of and follows rules for masculine performance. Following the paradigms set up by Dreyfus and Dreyfus we realize that Gabriel arrives at the “advanced beginner” stage wherein she follows instructional maxims without question. At this juncture, Gabriel becomes “competent” in her performance as a male; she is unable to detach herself from the previously learned maxims and is enveloped in masculinity. Continuing to practice her skill at masculinity, she arrives at the “proficient” stage, a juncture where intuitive



behavior has replaced reasonable response. Successfully guided through the first four stages of phenomenal embodiment, she arrives at the “expert” stage. This is the locus wherein she is “immersed in the world of [her] skillful activity” which is dominantly masculine (Dreyfus 105-10). Gabriel’s training as a male manifests itself physically via neural transmission and manifests itself cerebrally via continuous practice.

Dreyfus and Dreyfus further assert that neural networks provide a paradigm of how the past affects present and future perception. Past experience situates itself neurally, rather than via deposition as a memory. New cognitive input then produces output based on experiences of the past without association to a memory (115). Gabriel’s identification with the male gender stemming from a childhood replete with masculine performance and completely without feminine influence is ossified. There can be no question that Gabriel’s reality is created for her. She adroitly performs the part of a male cerebrally as well as physically. Not only is Gabriel a “noble student” proficient in Latin but a “handsome cavalier” who enjoys hunting and fencing as well (Prologue.2).

Bramante is cognizant of the fact that he cannot erase Gabriel’s female sex, but he believes that by exposing his heir to demeaning visual images of women, he will cause her to feel defiled in the role of a female and proclaim her constructed male status. Upon returning after his ten year absence, Prince Bramante is apprised by the Abbe that

Since his earliest childhood [Gabriel] has been imbued with the grandeur of the masculine role, the abject condition of the feminine role in nature and society. The first paintings to strike his attention, the first facts of history to awaken his thoughts, showed him the weakness and subjection of the one sex, the freedom and power

of the other. You can see on the panels the frescoes that I had executed by your orders. Here the rape of the Sabine women. On that the treason of Tarpeia. There the crime and punishment of the Danaid women. That other the sale of woman slaves in the Orient. Over there the repudiated queens, spurned or betrayed lovers, widows forcefully sacrificed on the funeral pyres of their husbands. Everywhere the woman enslaved, appropriated, conquered, resisting fetters only to be meted out a worse punishment, and only able to break away through lies, betrayal, futile and ugly crimes (Prologue.1).

The corollary of Gabriel's exposure to these artistic representations of the debasement of women is the solidification of her identification with the male gender. Ideas are implanted in Gabriel's mind that the patriarch hopes will cause her to loathe women even when she comes to the realization that she is not of the male sex so that she will choose to retain the male identity which is inscribed upon her body.

The depictions of femininity the Abbe chooses are debasing and demeaning. The imagery of the Sabine women promotes the idea of male dominance and suggests that women are mere objects available for the taking who have no right to freedom of choice.<sup>9</sup> The image of Tarpeia's greed propagates the misogynistic notion that avarice and duplicity are feminine characteristics.<sup>10</sup> The Danaids are portrayed as literal backstabbing creatures who were condemned to an eternity of futile labor for not submitting to their husbands.<sup>11</sup> The depiction of selling women as slaves can only impress upon a young mind the idea that women are chattel and entitled to no liberty whatsoever, and the representation of Suttie suggests that women are worthless objects

and should be disposed of the moment their husbands pass away.<sup>12</sup>

Yet after seeing the derisive depictions of the female sex, Gabriel mentions to the Abbe that she wants to “know the world, to see the men [she has] heard praised, [and] the women [she has] heard debased” (Prologue.3). Such discourse would surely leave a prejudicial impression on Gabriel’s mind; the referent (woman) becomes the reviled, the feminine becomes the fetid, and the phallic becomes the favored. In “The Mark of Gender,” feminist theorist Monique Wittig maintains that “language casts sheaves of reality upon the social body, stamping it and violently shaping it” (64). Furthermore, Wittig contends that language can have a damaging effect that can scar the listener (*Mark* 66-67). The discursive power exercised in Gabriel’s presence leaves behind a blemish that causes her to “appear[. . .] loath to speak to [women]” (Prologue.7). Whether it was loathing or fear of punishment, Gabriel does not speak with women as a result of the voice of the patriarch echoing within her mind.

Chodorow postulates that language is initially conveyed to a child via “the parental voice in an all-pervasive way” and that the interchange communicates meaning “concerning the world of physical and cultural objects” (58-59). Gabriel is aware she has always been referred to as male, as a “he.” That personal pronoun functions as the instrument that inscribes a male identity onto the body of Gabriel, and the discourse Gabriel is exposed to elevates man in every word while woman lies prostrate and objectified. Case in point: When Gabriel’s horse throws her, she states she is frightened. The Abbe admonishes her that “A man must never be afraid.” Furthermore, the Abbe asserts that it is natural for a man to confront danger as “it is that in particular which distinguishes him from the female” (Prologue.3). Not only is

gendered language used to differentiate Gabriel, as a male, from a timorous and trepid female, it is also being employed to manipulate her emotions.

Through his servants and go betweens, Bramante has “mold[ed] the mind” of Gabriel and “enhance[d] [her with] the knowledge” that she is a “prince” (Prologue.2). Over the course of Gabriel’s upbringing, words directed at her including but not limited to “sir,” are employed by Bramante via the Abbe to elicit a performative effect. Prasad relies on J.L. Austin to explain the performative function of language in regard to gender (338). I concur with Prasad who sees the relevance of Austin’s text *How To Do Things With Words* in regard to the plight of Gabriel. Austin lucidly explains the impact a mere utterance can have on an individual’s reality (6). Like Wittig, Austin contends that language not only relays information; it influences the speaker/listener (338). Enunciated phrases such as “I am” and “he is” function as performative sentences that manifest a degree of reality in the mind of the speaker/listener. Thus performative language, as well as an education focusing on the “internalization of misogyny” puts into effect Gabriel’s male gender (Prasad 336). Taking into consideration Julia Kristeva’s “The True-Real,” we can see how enunciation has foreclosed Gabriel’s feminine nature and what is now true and real for her is her status as a male (219).

Governed by Bramante within a familial as well as a political realm, Gabriel has unwittingly assimilated masculinity both internally and externally. Via the intromission of patriarchal ideology, and through introduction to the pleasures of masculine recreation and a traditional male education, Gabriel’s body is sexualized as a male and cerebrally she believes that she is a prince. Despite the fact that Bramante and the Abbe believe they have been successful in creating Gabriel a male, or at least in imbuing her with the

utmost degree of misogyny that she will not embrace femininity, intrinsically she is alerted to the fact that in essence, she is something different.

## II.

### THE WOMAN WITHIN: ESSENTIAL REVELATIONS IN DREAMS

In spite of Gabriel's masculine education, George Sand appears to support the essentialist view that an individual's biological sex cannot completely be suppressed or subverted by cultural construction. In Sand's creation, Gabriel is alerted to her "true sex" through a vision in a dream. Gabriel's metaphorical dream not only unveils her female essence, but through symbols, unleashes her unconscious desire to connect with a mother figure. Even though Gabriel has spent the entirety of her life performing as a male, her misogynistic upbringing did not have a profound enough effect to subdue her intrinsic femininity. Gabriel's dream lucidly confirms the fact that essentially she is female.

In "Sexual Difference and the Problem of Essentialism," critic Elizabeth Grosz applies the term "Essentialism" specifically to the "fixed essence of a woman," a universal given of a woman's biology or "natural characteristics" (84). Gabriel's "fixed essence" is not debatable. Born female, her biological sex is merely suppressed by Bramante's patriarchal constructionist agenda. Gabriel may have been denied the overt knowledge of her female sex; however, a force from within emerges during her dream state and implants the truth regarding her sex in her unconscious mind.

In *Essentially Speaking*, feminist theorist Diana Fuss establishes "Essentialism" as "a belief in the real, true essence of things," a fixed property that defines "what" a given entity is (Introduction xi). Fuss places the "female essence" in a location outside of the boundaries of the social, in a place where it exists untouched (although possibly

repressed) by patriarchy (2). Though Bramante is successful in repressing Gabriel's femininity and in inhibiting her knowledge of her biological sex, he is not capable of erasing her female essence as it exists intrinsically and flows through her emotively, and eventually revealed to her oneirically.

Nancy Chodorow argues that feminism has subordinated "personal emotional meaning" to discursive power in the realm of gender construction and suggests "that gender cannot be seen as entirely culturally, linguistically, or politically constructed" (71). Sand anticipates the theorist's insights; Gabriel's gender is not solely created by patriarchal imposition, but by cultural construction and her own identification of her essential femininity. In the instance of Gabriel, it stands to reason that her gender is "an inextricable intertwining [. . .] of personal and cultural meaning" (Chodorow 70). Chodorow further contends that through emotions and unconscious fantasy, an individual devises personal meaning in connection with images and discourse conveyed to him or her by others.

Taking a look back at Gabriel's exposure to art, we can conjecture that at some point in Gabriel's mere seventeen years she became aware of the fact that the depicted women were not just abject objects, but living souls worthy of her empathy and pity. Bramante inquires as to the sentiments these portraits inspire in his heir and the Abbe replies, "A mixture of horror and compassion, of hatred and sympathy" (Prologue.2). Indeed the horror and hatred inspired in Gabriel is not toward women, but toward the men who insolently enslave, rape, persecute, and torment women. Gabriel's emotion in connection with these depictions is not the anticipated misogyny but incredulity. Thus, Gabriel is not so much accepting of a "false divide between emotion and reason" but is

paying attention to “outlaw emotions,” those feelings that Chodorow states generate critique (73). Critical of the abasing images of women thrust upon her, Gabriel may not consider reason to reign supreme over sentiment and in actuality, she experiences horror and despair—her emotional reaction is not one that men are traditionally supposed to exhibit, and these forbidden feelings impel her to critique the pernicious masculine ideology imposed upon her. Gabriel may very well have feelings of kinship to the female sex; after all, her essence has merely been repressed, not obliterated. Her female essence may be the impetus that allows her to see through the deceptive but permeable veil created by hegemonic devices.

The Abbe extends to Bramante the notion that Gabriel’s education is so potent that it creates an “impenetrable veil” over her consciousness (Prologue.2). But a veil is merely a cover-up; it disguises the reality that lies beneath. In *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle*, Elaine Showalter recalls Salome who drops her veils to reveal “sexual difference, creativity, and the psyche” (144). Gabriel parallels Salome in that a figurative unveiling reveals her sexual secret. The unveiling takes place in her psyche in the form of a dream wherein she envisions herself as a woman. In regard to her dream, Gabriel states “I was a young girl dressed in a long flowing gown and crowned with flowers. [ . . . ] I was a woman” (Prologue.3).

Gabriel’s dream haunts her and fills her with sadness, yet she does not find it disagreeable (Prologue.2). Prasad finds in this reaction a wavering of Gabriel’s gender allegiance and claims that her unconscious manifestation creates a gender instability lending fluidity to her gender identification (337). I believe Gabriel’s gender identification is fluid, but in the sense that she flows from the masculine to the feminine

effortlessly, not in the sense that her allegiance to her male gender is rigid and has now turned. I find no evidence that she has pledged allegiance to the masculine role; after all, Gabriel does not believe her “soul is one sex or the other” (Prologue.3). Furthermore, Gabriel states that

I don't feel in myself any absolute power for anything. I don't feel brave in any absolute way, or cowardly in any absolute way. There are days when in the heat of the noon-day sun my forehead burns, my horse gets drunk from the chase, and I would jump the most frightening precipices in our mountains for the sheer pleasure of it. Then there are dark nights when the sound of a window rattling in the wind gives me the chills. [. . .] The man who would boast that he is never afraid would be blustering. And a woman who says she has days of acting courageously could not surprise me (Prologue.5).

Even though Gabriel engages in masculine recreation and has been privileged to a traditional male education, she does not commit to the ideology of male supremacy. It is evident that Gabriel personally enjoys masculine avocations and occupations; she does not merely partake in them under duress. Gabriel has become accustomed to the pleasures of riding horses, studying the classics, and the comfort of wearing a costume that allows her greater mobility than does female attire. Her behavior does not signify an allegiance to the male gender nor does her dream suggest that she vacillates between gender roles.

What occurs during Gabriel's dream state is an emergence of the intrinsic knowledge that she is female. Although she has identified with men for seventeen years,



now she identifies with women as well. In the seminal *Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud sets forth the theory that oneiric images prove that “what is suppressed continues to exist” (Welsh 4). It is evident that Gabriel’s female sex was suppressed by patriarchal devices and yet it continues to exist in her unconscious mind. In *Omens of Millenium*, literary critic Harold Bloom illuminates the ancient belief that a dream is inspired by the thoughts of the heart (91). Bloom recounts Heraclitus’s belief that “when we are awake, we have one common world; but when we are asleep each turns aside to a world of [our] own” (qtd. in Bloom 93). Gabriel’s female essence has always existed intrinsically; perhaps on an unconscious level, and in her unconscious world, she is quintessentially a woman. Bloom further points out that in some cultures and religions, dreams are considered prophetic visions (93). Gabriel’s dream can be considered prophetic as it is no wish fulfillment; she does not yearn to be female—she is female. When Gabriel asks the Abbe where dreams come from, he conveniently evades an answer. Gabriel’s dream is neither delusional nor fantastical; her vision is a revelation, an epiphany if you will, which functions as the key that unlocks her female essence.

Bloom presents the research of Swiss medical team Dietrich Lehmann and M. Koukkou whose studies conclude that dreams are the product of a revisionary process taking place in the unconscious mind (97). In previous years, the only identity Gabriel was familiar with was that of a prince. Yet after her dream the conceptions impressed upon her during her formative years are no longer ubiquitous and her past may now be altered. While Gabriel is sleeping, unconsciously she is altering her childhood, the locus wherein she was created a male. Her mind is working to reverse the effects of gender imposture and is trying on the image of herself as a woman. Therefore, the oneiric

activity which Gabriel experiences is crucial to her identity.

Another theory presented by Bloom apropos of Gabriel is the neurological theory of scientist and Nobel Prize winner Francis Crick. Crick proposes that a dream is the brain's way of purging irrelevant material (Bloom 97). For the entirety of her life, Gabriel has been trained to perform as a male. Her female essence exists innately but is in jeopardy of being eliminated by unconscious cerebral activity triggered by neurological responses to the physicality of performing as a male. However, Gabriel's essence does not take flight and evaporate into thin air; it permeates her mind and is manifest in her unconscious vision.

In her dream state, Gabriel has wings that allow her to "fly high enough to traverse other worlds," and that impel her to envision herself "not an inhabitant of this world" (Prologue.3). In *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*, philosopher Mircea Eliade explains that flight imagery suggests a psychic desire to free oneself and abolish a heavy weight (104). Furthermore, "flight signifies intelligence, the understanding of secret things" (105). Eliade also notes that ascension is symbolic of transcendence and signifies a longing to liberate one's self from limitations (106). The impetus of Gabriel's revelatory experience is an intrinsic knowledge that her identity is inauthentic. In her dream, Gabriel, as a woman, ascends to an ideal locale where she is free from the constraints of the physical world and the weight of the imposture of performing as a male is lifted. The succession of images is not illusory, but a lucid forecast of Gabriel's essential female nature and a revelation of her crucial secret.

In her dream, Gabriel exhibits a desire to reunite with a maternal entity. A heavy chain which hangs around her neck pulls her toward an abyss (Prologue.3). Symbolically

speaking, the chain may represent an umbilical cord that connects Gabriel to a metaphorical vaginal opening. Her descent to earth represents a longing to connect with a mother figure or a return to the womb. Eliade explains the Earth-Mother myth as a primordial image existent in virtually every culture which signifies the earth as a womb, a life-bearing orb (156). Gabriel is never presented with an opportunity to experience maternal bonding; therefore, her female essence subconsciously creates within her a curiosity and a yearning for a link to a feminine entity. Gabriel experiences what feminist critics Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar call a “vision of connection,” which begins “with an awakening in the darkness” (102). While lingering in the darkness of somnolence, phantasmagoria alert Gabriel to the fact that she has been deprived of maternal bonding and create within her a desire to return to her primordial state.

Gabriel’s dream is only the onset of her identification with her female gender. A short time after her dream, a profound moment of recognition occurs when she views herself in a mirror costumed as a woman for a ball. At the urging of Astolphe, Gabriel agrees to the masquerade, which is concocted as a joke. Prior to gazing upon herself, she feels physically stifled confined in the torturous corset. Upon first glance at her semblance in the mirror, Gabriel states, “It seems not to be so difficult after all” (2.4). What seems not so difficult? Fitting into women’s clothing, or accepting the truth that she is a woman? The scene abruptly ends with Gabriel absorbed in her reflection. Astolphe bursts in on her to find a very convincing “Gabrielle” standing before him.<sup>13</sup> What transpires in the brief moment before Astolphe’s arrival is Gabriel’s recognition of her female essence. Her biological sex and the reality that she is not male is captured in specular form during a formative Mirror Stage moment.

According to Jacques Lacan, identification of the self (in this case, Gabriel's physical sex) "takes place in the subject when [she] assumes an image" (1286). In the specular image, Gabriel views her primordial "I," the "I" she was born as, not the social "I" she is constructed as and has performed up until this juncture. But this specular image is not her "Ideal-I" since a gestalt has not yet occurred bringing forth a synthesis of both her male and female gender (Lacan 1286). According to Butler, "The mirror stage is not a *developmental* account of how the idea of one's own body comes into being." Butler contends that this stage allows an individual to psychically "project a *morphe*, a shape" onto one's body by differentiating it from another (*Bodies* 71). At this moment, Gabriel's gender is bifurcated. Recognition is taking place, but there is no gender merger. Her masculine persona is aesthetically mollified yet her female sex is not incorporated as part of her reality; at this point, she will merely mimic her specular likeness. Gabriel's differentiation of her female image from her male image is the impetus that causes her to realize that the masculinity which was previously imposed on her body is inauthentic. However, she is beginning to glean pieces of the gender she would have identified with had her present reality not been constructed for her, and this gender is beginning to ostensibly manifest itself in her performance as a woman.

Gabriel does not just take on the visual appearance of an alluring woman. After seeing herself costumed in feminine attire, she physically performs as a woman. Gabriel begins to tremble when she is faced with Astolphe's admission that he finds her beautiful as a woman. She even admits that the outfit she has chosen to wear, a white silk dress, was inspired by her dream (2.7). Gabriel's first attempt at performing the part of a female is so authentic that all the men she encounters share Astolphe's illusion and

“want[. . .] to touch the glass where [her] lips had touched.” Her feminine aura is so intense that Astolphe can not help but notice the “languorous beauty” of her arms and her countenance, which displays a “melancholy smile” and a “candor so different from the impudent expressions plastered on [the] bacchantes!” Furthermore, her mere presence causes other women present at the gathering to “imitate [her] reserve,” and the men to “submit[. . .] to a secret instinct of respect” (2.7). Gabriel’s upbringing devoid of feminine influence should make it impossible for her to know how to perform so convincingly as a woman. The only images she was exposed to merely illustrated the female form; they did not teach poise, or charm, or how to emanate femininity. Her enticing aura just may be her female essence.

Upon witnessing praises of her convincing portrayal as a woman, Gabriel must acknowledge that her female façade is not merely a fabrication but a physical manifestation of the figure she invoked in her dream. Suddenly and without warning, she takes a stand against Astolphe’s ill treatment of his mistress, Faustina (2.6). Gabriel’s speaking up for a woman foreshadows the fact that she soon will embrace the femininity she is simply mimicking at this stage. Irigaray perceives that “the ‘first’ stake in mimesis [is] that of re-producing (from) nature” (*This* 77). For Irigaray, a woman’s play at mimicry is an attempt to recuperate the locus of her exploitation without being reduced to it (*This* 76). Gabriel’s female disguise is not a cover-up, but an undressing of her masculine gender. Even though Gabriel is undergoing a mimesis of the scopic image of herself as a woman, in actuality, the alternate gender she performs at this moment is the sex she innately desires to appropriate for herself.

Though Astolphe still believes Gabriel is male, he reveals to her that he loves her

despite the fact that he finds it incomprehensible. He admits to being “in the grips of [the] strange illusion” that his cousin is a female and divulges his passion for her. Furthermore, he initiates a duel to fight for Gabriel’s honor when a drunken Antonio believing Gabriel is a woman insists on a kiss from her (2.7). After returning to her apartment, Gabriel informs her servant, Marc, that she has not behaved like a man and vows to return to the role of a boy. Once Gabriel is alone she becomes distraught over the prospect that Astolphe could love her—but only if she performs as a woman—and tears the oppressive costume from her body. She believes that Astolphe’s desire for her is merely an “illusion”; nevertheless, his hug “consumed” her and she feels her troubles are about to begin. In an attempt to release herself from the confining corset, Gabriel cuts the binding ties with her sword. However, her masculine effort at freeing herself from the womanly costume exposes her breasts, and poignantly enlightens Gabriel to the fact that her female sex is a reality that can no longer be concealed. It is now compulsory for her to identify with her female sex as Astolphe covertly enters her room and, upon observing his bare-breasted cousin, announces the truth: “Gabriel, you are a woman!” A solitary candlestick drops to the floor and all light is extinguished along with Gabriel’s fraudulent masculine persona (2.9).

Act III delivers a very different Gabriel. The second half of Sand’s drama commences with the heroine performing virtual femininity. For Gabriel to live autonomously as Astolphe’s lover, she has moved in to the small, dilapidated castle he shares with his mother, Settimia, and Barbe, her companion. Gabriel now participates in wifely duties, but she still has not relinquished her masculine hobbies. The ladies speak disparagingly of Gabriel as they find her masculine hobbies inappropriate and her

feminine skills less than deft. Barbe belittles Gabriel for her unorganized and unorthodox way with needlework and Settimia finds her attempt at embroidery “very pretty foolishness!” and believes it “bad fortune to get such a daughter-in-law!” (3.1). Even though Gabriel has not stopped participating in rugged outdoor activities, she is still physically appealing enough for Como, Settimia’s confessor, to find desirable. Not only does Como make it clear that he could endure Gabriel’s affection, he refutes the denigration of Settimia and Barbe by pointing out that she is “not maladroit” in feminine abilities and states that flowers she embroiders on Astolphe’s coat lining are lovely. In addition, he commends her for her riding ability and intellectual pursuits (3.1).

In view of the fact that Gabriel embraces her femininity yet refuses to take on the culturally constructed role of a woman, we might ask, Is she a real woman, or merely a façade of one? According to Wittig in “One is Not Born a Woman,” the term “woman” is “a political constraint, and those who resist[. . .] it [are] accused of not being real” (2016). But what about Gabriel? Biologically she is a woman. She participates in feminine and masculine activities, but she is also imbued with masculine ideology although she does not assimilate misogynistic philosophy. She does not deny or loathe her female sex, yet she does not surrender her masculine persona. Gabriel does not merely emulate masculinity; she embodies it and performs it quite proficiently. She also exhibits an alluring femininity and desires the love of a man.

Wittig proposes “At least for a woman, wanting to become a man proves that she has escaped her initial programming. But even if she would like to, [. . .] she cannot become a man [as it] would demand from a woman not only a man’s external appearance but his consciousness as well” (“One” 2016). Though specifically referring to lesbians,

this statement seems apropos of Gabriel who has been programmed as a male and chooses to perform masculinity, yet is physically female. Most importantly, she shuns her culture's misogynistic notions. Gabriel cannot be codified as a man; neither can she be classified as a woman—in spite of not being a lesbian, she exemplifies Wittig's "something else, a not-woman, a not-man" ("One" 2016).

Even though Gabriel decides to wear a woman's costume and has "become a woman again," she still does not fall prey to the culturally constructed idea that women should avoid participation in traditional male activities nor does she fold under social coercion imploring her to give up a lifestyle that she enjoys. Gabriel retains "that calm of power that a male education develops and cultivates." Furthermore, she announces to Astolphe that "I am something more than a woman" (3.5). Within her milieu her gender identification appears transgressive. She exists in a third sex that coalesces the rugged behavior of man, the sensibility of woman, and the intellect that both sexes should be entitled to, but woman is deprived of. In short, Gabriel is an androgyne.

### III.

#### THE ANDROGYNY OF AN ANGEL

Pratima Prasad presents several interesting definitions of androgyny, the first borrowed from A.J.L. Busst, which echoes Wittig's definition of a lesbian. Busst defines the androgyne as those individuals who can be construed as men or women, or neither women nor men, in that they unite specific essential characteristics of both sexes. Prasad cites Carolyn Heilbrun's definition as "a spirit of reconciliation between the sexes." Marjorie Garber's idea of androgyny as cited by Prasad gives the impression that it is a state of transcendence, or an attainment of perfection beyond gender (332). In



*Androgyny and the Denial of Difference*, Kari Weil presents myriad theories regarding androgyny. She sets forth the classic view of Aristophanes, a character in Plato's *Symposium*, which presents the androgyne as a third being, a male/female combination that stands juxtaposed with the primal male and female. Weil states that the figure can be seen as "an archetype or a universal fantasy" (3), and later, that the androgyne suggests a balance, a state of wholeness, which one arrives at via the amalgamation of feminine and masculine characteristics. Looking at the phenomenon from an academic feminist perspective, we can see that androgyny becomes the fight for psychological and sociopolitical parity between the two sexes (Weil 145). When we turn to Sand's text, we see that although Gabriel's gender is comprised of the opposing binarism of man/woman, that the playwright melds them together. I believe Gabriel's gender is a fusion, not a farrago. Her gender is a union created by opposing forces: culture and her own intrinsic force. Gabriel seems to be an anomaly in her world, but upon closer inspection, her gender might not be as transgressive as it initially appears.

In *Thinking About Women: Sociological Perspectives on Sex and Gender*, sociologist Margaret Andersen discusses various cultures which consider there to be more than just two genders. She points out that "in some African and American Indian societies, there are those who are biological females living as men, known as manly hearted women" who are considered "female men" (29). These "manly hearted women" do not necessarily dress or behave like men, but maintain a certain financial status that allows them to purchase wives (29). Looking at Gabriel, one can find her in a similar position. Her similarity to the various African and American Indian societies lies in the fact that she is of the female sex and is in a position where her fortune would allow her to

purchase a wife should she choose to keep up the imposed charade of a prince. Of course, since she possesses the sexual organs of a female, she would be forced to live in complete chastity since Bramante would not risk the discovery of her secret. But unlike other androgynes, Gabriel is not a “manly hearted woman,” but a womanly hearted man.

For example, during a tavern brawl, Gabriel heroically disarms a violent gangster and thrusts her sword against his throat. The gangster pleads with his assailant for mercy and states that he will no longer engage in criminal activities if his life is spared. The manly thing to do would be to impale the would-be assassin; however, Gabriel is unable to follow through with murder and spares the gangster’s life. She admonishes him that should he go back on his word, “may God hear and punish [him] doubly” (1.1). Since Gabriel exhibits the sensitivity of being unable to follow through with corporeal punishment for an attack on her life, she proves she is “a brave man and a most womanly woman.”<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the violence *and* mercy she demonstrates codifies her as an androgyne. According to Lucienne Frappier-Mazur, an androgyne “can embody in one single being the harmonious and ideal fusion of [. . .] intelligence and love, [and] reason and intuition” (qtd. in Naginski 17).<sup>15</sup>

In uniting such disparate characteristics, Gabriel appears of mythical proportion, perhaps something more than an androgyne, something more sublime. Ironically, it is the same marauder who engaged in the fracas with Gabriel at the onset of Sand’s drama who is hired by Bramante to assassinate her at the play’s conclusion. After delivering the fatal stab, the gangster realizes that he has murdered his liberator and falls to his knees screaming, “My master! My angel!” (5.8). Gabriel does indeed exhibit the heroic and intrepid traits of a man and the heartfelt sentiment of a woman; and the fact that she

spared her assailant's life impels him to bestow upon her the status of an angel.

As a woman, Gabriel would be pressed to conform to cultural constraints and submit to an ancillary position should she relinquish her birthright to Astolphe or she would be forced by Bramante to cloister herself away in a nunnery. She lacks the incentive to conform to the role of a man because confined to that gender, she would be denied sexual liberty and her female essence would be permanently stifled. As an androgyne, Gabriel is deemed a transgressive anomaly who will have little to no chance of gaining her society's respect. Perhaps the time has come for Gabriel to consider that she may be something other than an androgyne, someone more ethereal. In the words of Astolphe to Gabriel, "You are not half man and half woman as you think, but an angel in human form" (3.5).<sup>16</sup>

#### IV.

##### ENTERTAINING ANGELS: CELESTIAL IDENTIFICATION

Angels [. . .] turn themselves into different shapes,  
being sometimes female and sometimes male.

--*The Zohar* (Vayehi 232 b)<sup>17</sup>

It is impossible to ignore the abundance of allusions to Gabriel as an angel; even her "birth was awaited as a celestial favor" (Prologue.3). When Gabriel relates the details of her dream to the Abbe, he informs her that she envisions herself as an angel, not as a woman (Prologue.3). In a white gown costumed for the ball, Astolphe remarks that Gabriel resembles the marble angels that adorn cathedrals and that she plays her role like an angel (2.5). Faustina finds Gabriel's behavior at the ball "angelic" and considers her a "beautiful cherub" (2.6). The heroine even possesses the name of the biblical angel Gabriel, who is androgynous by historic account, as well as linked to the moon, a

celestial body symbolic of femininity (Bunson 114-16). Educated in a convent, Sand was surely acquainted with mythical beings of the celestial realm. Evidence of Sand's affinity for the angel Gabriel is found in her autobiography, *Story of My Life*, through descriptions of her imaginary childhood friend, Corambé. Sand describes Corambé as a mythical entity with androgynous characteristics who "shift[s] easily from male to female" (19). Appearing to Sand "under the guise of a woman [. . .] Corambé is without sex and [. . .] would become man or woman" (qtd. in Jack 59-60).<sup>18</sup> Corambé is a divinity conceived by Sand who possesses "an otherworldly purity" (*Story* 926). Most importantly, her imaginary friend is "as shining and handsome as [the angel] Gabriel" (*Story* 605).

The parallel between Sand's later imaginary creation and Gabriel the angel is striking. In *Angels A to Z*, the angel Gabriel is presented as "the only female in the higher echelons [of angels]" (169). Harold Bloom refers to Gustav Davidson's *A Dictionary of Angels* which notes that "Gabriel once fell into disgrace 'for not obeying a command exactly as given, and remained for a while outside the heavenly Curtain'" (119). Sand's Gabriel also fell into disgrace for not obeying patriarchal orders, and in order to perform as a woman, Astolphe and his mother impelled her to remain outside of the curtain of masculinity. In *Sexes and Genealogies*, Luce Irigaray postulates that angels are misunderstood and forgotten, remembered only through the works of poets and via religious icons (35). Sand's heroine, the exceedingly misunderstood androgynous Gabriel Bramante, clearly recalls her angelic namesake.

Bloom suggests we prepare to encounter angels at the gates of dreams (41). This is the very threshold where Gabriel encounters an angel—herself. And, it is no accident

that as an angel, she would be androgynous. Lewis and Oliver's *Angels A to Z* presents the belief that "theologians [. . .] have usually considered angels to be androgynous, or to combine maleness and femaleness in perfect wholeness" (174). In *Angels and Devils*, Catholic writer Joan Carroll Cruz states that angels are neither male nor female, "although they have qualities that [are associated] with masculinity, or femininity" (17). And in *Angels: Ministers of Grace*, philosopher Geddes MacGregor states that in literature, some authors assign androgynous qualities to their heroes and heroines and that a reader will "miss the point of this device" if androgyny is thought of merely "as sexual completeness." MacGregor goes on to state that androgyny is "more complex" as it "symbolizes wholeness, perfection: the perfection of a primordial state of undividedness" (174). MacGregor applies this perfect androgyny to angels and contends that they "have no need to reproduce themselves, so [. . .] their sexuality could not include this function" (173). Biblical scholar Edward P. Myers' *A Study of Angels* supports MacGregor's assertion that "angels are unmarriageable [. . .] Some use the term sexless—they have no gender" (21). In *Angels A to Z: A Who's Who of the Heavenly Host*, General Editor of the *Catholic Almanac* Matthew Bunson also asserts that "angels are of no specific gender or sex" (118).

Nevertheless, angels do serve a purpose: "they are sent from heaven to teach men" (McConkie 27). In *Angels*, Mormon theologian Oscar W. McConkie, Jr. propounds that "one of the important aspects of [. . .] angels is that we learn from them" (85). I believe Gabriel makes an earnest effort to teach men of the equality of women, but she falls short in her lessons due to the fortitude of the masculine ideology of her day. Throughout Gabriel's journey she makes every effort to instruct men that women deserve

respect, not flattery nor condemnation. Unfortunately, Gabriel's lessons are offered in vain as Astolphe's respect for Gabriel as a male wanes when she takes on the female role.

Even though Gabriel is content in the role of Astolphe's wife, her idea of perfection is tainted as he becomes less and less at ease with her androgyny. Tired of Gabriel's philosophical and intellectual mind as well as her masculine activities, which place her in the company of other men, Astolphe attempts to quell her male gender by suggesting she spend part of the year being "just" a woman (4.4). Gabriel mentions that over the course of their marriage she has intermittently set aside her hybrid gender and performed as "just" a woman at his request. First it was for a period of three months, then six. It is obvious that Astolphe now seeks to impose the role of woman on Gabriel permanently (4.4). Much like Hades, Astolphe desires to make a Persephone out of Gabriel by subduing her to a life of submission and solitude in a dark, isolated realm.<sup>19</sup> Even though Astolphe tries his hand at manipulating Gabriel to succumb to the permanent role of a woman, she asserts her unhappiness at being hidden away and deprived of her masculine persona. Her attempt at autonomy is thwarted as a threatened Astolphe asserts his notion of male dominance and locks Gabriel in her room. This angel now realizes that her androgyny not only stamps her as aberrant within her culture, but a victim in her relationship as well.

Unable to tolerate the dominance of a master, and unwilling to relinquish either her masculine or feminine persona, Gabriel, "a strange creature, a free spirit," a "strange and unhappy creature, unique on this earth," must seek liberty elsewhere (Prologue.4). Irigaray explains that angels "cannot be captured [or] domesticated," and that to attempt to appropriate an angel, or to deny its existence, is exactly what destroys it (*Sexes* 42-

43). Angels, Irigaray contends, must always return to the heavens; they must go home (*Sexes* 36). Gabriel will not meet with harmony and legitimization until she gains entry to a realm wherein her past, and her oppressors cannot touch, torment, or tarnish her. Gabriel's future is subject to risk and like the winged creature she envisions herself as in her dream, her emancipation will only occur via an exodus from temporality. Her predicament has become petrified; she will never be able to crumble the cultural and patriarchal buttress that fortifies the prison within which she dwells. Irigaray notes that angels lack the threshold that will allow them entry into temporality; therefore, Gabriel's only alternative is to seek entrance to an ethereal realm (*Sexes* 45). Gabriel must eradicate herself by taking flight and transcending spatial temporality. At the close of the drama, Gabriel recognizes that she exists within a liminal sphere, a realm wherein she has not completely crossed over the threshold into the sublime. Gabriel has resigned herself to the fact that for her, liberty lies outside of the material world.

## V.

### EXISTENCE IN THE THRESHOLD: GABRIEL'S LIMINALITY

The term "Liminality" was coined by anthropologist Arnold van Gennep in his 1908 book, *The Rites of Passage*. To van Gennep, the "liminal" is a transitional stage, or a "threshold" (21). Liminality (*Limen*, Latin for "threshold") is the second of the three stages of cultural initiation. In the first phase, the initiate is separated from his or her society; in the second phase, the individual exists in a liminal or transitory realm; and in the third phase, he or she is incorporated into a social structure. The individual experiencing passage from isolation to integration dwells in the "neither here nor there" during the liminal stage (Hall 34). According to cultural anthropologist Victor Turner,

liminality is “a betwixt-and-between condition often involving seclusion from the everyday scene,” a position where “ambiguity reigns” (21-22). More importantly, liminality is a state of significant change in the dominant identification of one’s self. In the liminal realm, the itinerant shifts away from the persona he or she previously identified with to an identity that is different (Hall 41). Liminality is the movement from a “relatively fixed identity” which can be of a marginal nature, toward a different identity, an identity outside of one’s usual persona, wherein the individual will become unified with humanity (Hall 43).

Gabriel’s identity is subverted when she comes to the realization that it will be impossible for her to exist autonomously performing solely as a male within her principality, or as a woman within the confines of her romantic involvement with Astolphe. She decisively separates herself from her society and exists in isolation cloaking her identity under a black domino, attire hardly indicative of an angel (5.4-7). Gabriel must transcend the social boundaries she is familiar with up to this juncture and transition into a realm wherein she can exist harmoniously and independently. According to psychiatrist James A. Hall, “psychologically, liminality is the sense of crossing [. . .] borders (45). In order for Gabriel to transcend a world unaccepting of her androgynous persona, she must cross the border of temporality. As a transitory creature, Gabriel has no alternative but to embrace liminality until her transferal into a domain where she will be met with acceptance.

In a moment of reflection and introspection, Gabriel ponders her unique nature and is propelled into a state of despair over Astolphe’s lack of acceptance and her own isolation. Gabriel feels that her lover wants to treat her like the prostitutes he previously



cavorted with as well as stain her and “tear away [her] doublet [. . .] for proof of his rights to fortune and power” and to “unveil [her] for all to see” (5.8). Gabriel is plagued by ambivalence, internal strife, and a state of emotional and psychological perplexity stemming from cacophonous voices. The voice of the patriarch implores her to exist as a male, her lover’s voice entreats her to perform solely as a woman, and her own voice implores her seek freedom. Gabriel’s marginality and desire for autonomy within her culture challenges her ability to exist in a temporal realm and elicits within her a suicidal yearning (5.8).

## VI.

### SUICIDE SOLUTIONS AND DEATH AS LIBERATOR

Since misfortune stifles hope, [one] must find  
death in what [one] cannot find here.

--Alexandre Hardy<sup>20</sup>

To end this strife,  
Sweet Mistress come, and shew yourself to me,  
In your true form, while then I think to see  
Some beauty Angelik, that comes t’ unlock  
My bodies prison, and from life unyoke  
My well divorced soul, and set it free,  
To liberty eternal.

--Edward, Lord Herbert of  
Cherbury<sup>21</sup>

David A. Powell decides in *George Sand* that since Gabriel refuses to cast aside her masculine upbringing, she prefers “death to oppression” (84). Massardier-Kenney agrees and states that Gabriel’s reluctance to submit to the role of woman to please Astolphe is the cause of her death (136). But I contend that Gabriel also seeks freedom from her society, which solely categorizes people as male or female. Even though most cultures currently consider suicide transgressive, there is evidence that the voluntary

deaths of those who suffer extreme oppression have been condoned. In *History of Suicide: Voluntary Death in Western Culture*, Georges Minois suggests that taking one's own life is not altogether wrong under certain conditions. In some literature as well as some cultures, suicides have been found justifiable in that voluntary death removes individuals from insurmountable and unbearable grief, shame, and oppression (13-25). Furthermore, according to Antoine de Montchrestien's *La Carthaginoise*, "when it is prohibited to live freely, it is a fine gesture to die bravely" (qtd. in Minois 105).

Gabriel cannot exist autonomously. During her "profound reflections" and "long reexamination of [herself]," what has taken hold is the desire to commit "philosophical suicide" (Minois 275). Philosophical suicide occurs when an individual arrives at the conclusion that one's life is absurd under present conditions and that one's existence is worthless (Minois 256). Eliade elucidates that taking one's life is a way to "abolish temporal duration" and to annul the history of an individual's profane existence. By extricating one's self from temporality via an initiatory death, an individual may "re-enter into an immaculate, open existence, untainted by Time" (223). The events which occurred over time, a mere seventeen years in Gabriel's case, have rendered the angelic androgyne an anomaly within her society. Through death, the effects of her time spent existing within the parameters of hegemonic control will be abolished and her recrudescence will occur.

Had Gabriel taken her life at the moment when she conceived the notion, such an act would punish her grandfather and "ruin [his] hopes"; her death would have been legitimized as a revenge suicide (Prologue.5). In *The Enigma of Suicide*, George Howe Colt reports that in some primitive societies, suicide is committed as an act of vengeance

against a wrongdoer. An ancient Chinese law held that if an individual committed suicide because he was wronged by another, it was the wrongdoer would be held liable and punished. Furthermore, a tribe residing on the Gold Coast of Africa practiced the law that if a person blamed his suicide on another prior to extinguishing his life, the individual blamed was required to kill himself in the same fashion unless the suicide victim's family was monetarily compensated (133). Had Gabriel taken her life prior to her decision to seek out Astolphe, Bramante's collusion surely would have been exposed. His humiliation and disgrace, not to mention the fact that his scheme would have been thwarted by a woman, may have deemed Gabriel's suicide justifiable as she would have "usurp[ed] the power of death which the sovereign alone [had] the right to exercise (Foucault 138).

Try as she might to exhibit some semblance of independence in the material world, Gabriel is not even at liberty to take her own life. The despotic Bramante procures a murderer to terminate the life he is in jeopardy of losing control of. As Gabriel stands on the liminal threshold of the Sant'Angelo Bridge, her grandfather's henchman closes in on her and delivers the fatal wound. The weapon of choice to end Gabriel's life is the sword, a symbol of the "power of life and death" (Foucault 136). McCall suggests that Gabriel's demise facilitates the achievement of patriarchal authority (43). Bramante's destructive indiscretion and Gabriel's secret die with her. It appears male dominance is the victor, although in death perhaps Gabriel achieves a semblance of liberation. Through death, Gabriel evicts herself from a debased and peripheral existence and transitions from the liminal realm, through the threshold, and into a world wherein she will exist harmoniously.

In *The Rites of Passage*, van Gennep identifies the liminal doorway as a locus “of waiting, and of departing” (25). At the end of the drama, Gabriel’s waiting period has expired and the time has arrived for her to enter into a dominion wherein she will exist independently. Even though we could presume Gabriel a mortal whose life is extinguished in an untimely fashion, in the spirit of fantasy and imagination I hold that she is an ethereal being who “greet[s] her demise and embraces the freedom of death” (*Gabriel* Introduction xviii). Presuming a belief in the afterlife, through death, Gabriel’s past will be reconciled and she will arrive not at a cessation, but at a commencement. Gabriel’s flight from the physical world through the threshold of liminality will regenerate this “equivocal angel [with] altruistic ideals” (McCall 46). Upon transcending the transitory and temporal realm, Gabriel will recrudescence into a being whose sagacity and sexual ambiguity are not anomalous but legitimized. Manifold concludes that Gabriel’s “aspiration to become like an angel, free of masculine or feminine constrictions” is evident in the last image of her as a mortal as she lies in a transitory state beneath the statue of an angel on the Sant’Angelo Bridge (Introduction xviii). Gabriel’s parting words illuminate her belief that she will find liberty in death as well as her belief in her angelic status: “I wish you no ill. You have carried out heaven’s will. [. . .] Thank you . . . free . . . the dream . . . flying . . .” The “Holy Angel of the Castle” beats its wings and sounds the trumpet announcing Gabriel’s arrival home (5.9).

## CONCLUSION

*Gabriel* gives eloquent expression to the reality of gender difference. Furthermore, the titular heroine is an exquisite personification of Sand’s own “reluctance to live within the boundaries set by public opinion” (Jack 89). In view of the currency of

gender theory, I agree with Leonard C. Pronko who cannot understand why it took so long for Sand's drama to be translated into English when it "speaks so forcefully to contemporary concerns" (*Gabriel* Foreword vii). The issues surrounding gender and female oppression brought to light in *Gabriel* do resonate in today's world, and we still recognize that some women who do strive for parity to men meet with a challenge for acceptance. Unfortunately, Gabriel's quest for equality and acceptance, and her refusal to conform in accordance with the wishes of her oppressors, leaves her no alternative for liberation but through death. Gabriel's unique persona, her angelic attributes, and her unrelenting impulse to embody both male and female traits are entirely too innovative for her society to accept. Gabriel is an ethereal being whose marginal status renders her displaced in the physical world. Through death, Gabriel will leave her unpleasant temporal existence behind and enter into a numinous realm where she can exist in harmony.

Sand was no stranger to suicidal intentions or to the notion of death as liberator. During her late youth, Sand had an episode wherein her melancholy and anguish caused her fall prey to "the lure of suicide" (qtd. in Jack 93).<sup>22</sup> Sand believed in death as a cure for "the terrible weariness of living in this world" (qtd. in Jack 266).<sup>23</sup> It can be said of Gabriel that death removed her from the fatigue of the disenfranchised life she was forced to endure for not complying with her grandfather's wishes, and from living in utter despondency over the lack of Astolphe's acceptance. Gabriel, too, espouses the idea that she would find relief from the rigor of the material world through death. Gabriel's aspiration, that of existing in harmony as a unique, angelic androgyne, cannot be satisfied in the physical world. Only in an ideal realm, in a locus beyond the material, will Gabriel

meet with acceptance.

I find it disheartening that *Gabriel* was not received well enough to be produced publicly on the stage. Alphonse Royer, a director at the Odéon, vetoed it after finding it “too sad” (Manifold 88). Perhaps the overt melancholy of *Gabriel* is the manifestation of Sand’s saddened spirit at the time of its creation. Sand composed her mythic tale after a bleak winter spent in a gothic monastery in Majorca with her ailing son and her despondent lover, Chopin, surrounded by religious iconography (Ferrá 25-30). Sand herself thought *Gabriel’s* “Romanesque” nature was “too old for the boulevard theatres, and yet too modern still for the Comédie Française.” Furthermore, Sand was holding out for an actress who would authentically portray a “real man [. . .] not a woman in disguise,” and would not entertain the idea of a man in drag portraying her conspicuous androgyne (Manifold 79). Sand reworked *Gabriel* into *Julia* and *Octave d’Apremont*; the latter was produced, but only in a private setting (Manifold 138).

*Gabriel* joins the ranks of Beatrice Cenci and Malfi’s Duchess, aristocratic women who also meet with their untimely demise while on a quest for autonomy and the subversion of female oppression. *Gabriel* joins the ranks of innovative, female-authored dramatic literature that has not been brought to the forefront of literary history. This I find a travesty because I believe *Gabriel* is important both in understanding nineteenth-century French literature and our own concerns and preoccupations with gender, suicide and transcendence today. Manifold reminds us of Sand’s promise that *Gabriel* “would not be philosophical, fantastic or metaphysical” (Manifold 19). Either Sand was being facetious or attempting to throw potential readers off the track because I find *Gabriel* to exude a vast number of fantastical elements, salient philosophical dialogue, and a

metaphysical heroine. Gabriel is “pure fantasy” (*Gabriel* 1). She is an androgynous altruistic angel, a mystical messenger who delivers a poignant cry for equality between the sexes, a harbinger who sets the stage for feminist theory, and the ethereal creation of her whimsical mother-author.

Some would argue that Gabriel is not eternal, that she merely met with an untimely demise and left the material world without being transported to an ethereal locale. What is eternal about *Gabriel* is its illumination of a devoted quest for equality. Gabriel did not just fight for those who exhibit a diversified gender and she did not exclusively represent women. Gabriel’s battle traversed sexes as well as cultures and can be viewed as a quest for harmony within humanity as a whole. Like Gabriel, Sand took a secret to the grave. There is no evidence of the author’s intent for her angelic androgyne. We will never know whether Sand’s exalted imagination returned Gabriel to the heavens or left her dead as a mere mortal. The question must also be raised, why did Sand opt for murder over suicide? Perhaps the author who was raised in a convent and well versed in religious doctrine believed that by committing suicide, her ethereal androgyne would not be assured a place in heaven. Perhaps in actuality Sand conceived a mere woman whose quest for equality was considered so aberrant that transcending commonplace notions of gender roles was impossible.

One thing we can feel certain of is that Gabriel’s death did relieve her of the melancholy, torment, and tumult she endured in the physical world. In the spirit of Sandian fantasy, I hold true to my belief that Gabriel is an ethereal being who just may have been patterned after her biblical namesake. And I believe in Sand’s premise that an artist “needs to get out of the concrete world” (*Gabriel* 1). Sand wrote *Gabriel* while her

children were playing at her feet in their own fictional world. She was fascinated by her children's ability to chase fancy, to live in a world not chilled by reality, and to become engulfed in a world full of imagination (*Gabriel* 1). I believe that George Sand psychically removed herself from a tangible realm while composing this drama, and in doing so, she imaginatively removed Gabriel from the physical world and placed her altruistic androgynous angel in an unbiased and understanding universe.



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Classen, Constance. *The Color of Angels: Cosmology, Gender and the Aesthetic Imagination*. New York: Routledge, 1998. 83. St. Hildegard of Bingen, a twelfth-century abbess in her community of Benedictine nuns, developed a theology wherein femininity was a source of sin, and a source of salvation. Her song to the Virgin is published in *Symphonia: A Critical Edition of the Symphonia armonie celestium revelationum*. B. Newman, ed. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1988. 121. For further information on St. Hildegard, see Newman, B. *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1987.

<sup>2</sup> According to Manifold's introduction, Sand privately produced *Gabriel* in her little theatre at Nohant in 1859 under the title *Octave d'Apremont* (Introduction xii).

<sup>3</sup> Dickenson's assertion appears to have been utilized almost verbatim by Belinda Jack. Dickenson writes: "[Sand's] novel *Gabriel* (1840) concerns a princess who is given a boy's education by mistake, and turns out a perfectly capable 'prince' (48). Dickenson, Donna. *George Sand: A Brave Man—The Most Womanly Woman*. New York: Berg, 1989. Jack writes: "Gabriel is a princess who is given a boy's education by mistake, and who turns out to be a perfectly competent 'prince' (277). Jack does not note Dickenson as her source for this information.

<sup>4</sup> The *Lex Salica*, or Salic Law, was a code ascribed to Clovis and enacted by the Franks c. 507. Salic Law stated that no portion of an inheritance would pass to a woman, but that all land and property belonged to members of the male sex of the family (43-45). For a detailed history of the *Lex Salica*, see, Drew, Katherine Fisher. *Laws of the Salian Franks*. Philadelphia: U of Philadelphia P, 1991.

<sup>5</sup> Sandian fantasy can be more fully understood through Sand's autobiography, *Story of My Life*, which outlines her vivid childhood fantasies complete with imaginary friends and worlds, and illuminates her "exalted imagination" (610). A majority of Sand's fiction was formed around her fantastical imaginary companions (925).

<sup>6</sup> Stendahl's historic account and the dialogic dramas of Shelley and Artaud relate the legend of Beatrice Cenci, the daughter of a count in Renaissance Italy, who suffers abuse and incest at the hand of her despotic father. Beatrice, along with other family members, arrange for the murder of Count Cenci. She is ultimately executed in the piazza of the Castle Sant'Angelo.

<sup>7</sup> *New American Standard Bible*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1977.

<sup>8</sup> According to anthropological studies, "Symbols are 'instruments of expression, of communication, of knowledge and of control'" (145). Furthermore, an individual is constructed out of symbols and definitions from various cultural domains" (148). Turner, Victor. "Symbolic Studies." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 4 (1975).

9 Romulus had established the future site of Rome and amassed a conglomeration of men as founding citizens. Due to a paucity of women, Romulus invited the Sabine tribe to a festival and upon their arrival, the men were fought off and the women were captured and forced into sexual relations for the purpose of populating Rome (549-50). Morford, Mark P.O., and Robert J. Lenardon, eds. *Classical Mythology*. 5<sup>th</sup> ed. White Plains: Longman, 1995.

10 Tarapeia, daughter of a Roman commander engaged in the Roman/Sabine war, agreed to allow the Sabines into a territory making it possible for them to attack Rome's capitol if they gave her the gold bracelets they were wearing (549-50). Morford, Mark P.O., and Robert J. Lenardon, eds. *Classical Mythology*. 5<sup>th</sup> ed. White Plains: Longman, 1995.

11 The Danaids were forced into marrying men not of their choosing and retaliated by stabbing their husbands to death at the urging of their father (415-17). Hamilton, Edith. *Mythology*. Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1942.

12 According to George Howe Colt, suttee is a practice which originated in Hindu mythology when a woman flung herself onto her husband's funeral pyre as an act of devotion. He states that this practice is a matter of choice as well as coercion, and that no matter how well or how poorly she is treated, it is customary to show that life does not exist for a wife beyond existence with her spouse (136). Colt cites the eleventh-century religious text, *Padmapurana*, which states, "Whatever his defects may be, a wife should always look upon [her husband] as her god" (Quoted in Colt 136). Even though this practice was outlawed by the British in 1829, the practice continues in remote parts of India. The last known reported case occurred in 1987 (Colt 137).

13 Sand changes "Gabriel" to "Gabrielle" in Act III.

14 I borrow the phrase from Dickenson's *George Sand: A Brave Man—The Most Womanly Woman*. Dickenson may have derived her title from Turgenev's compliment, "What a brave man she was, and what good woman" (58). Holland, Barbara. *They Went Whistling: Women Wayfarers, Warriors, Runaways, and Renegades*. New York: Anchor Books, 2001.

15 Quoted from Frappier-Mazur, Lucienne. "Balzac et l'angrogyne." *L'Année Balzacienne*. Paris: Garnier, 1973. 260.

16 "Angel" is also the term of endearment Chopin bestowed upon Sand (Cates 480).

17 *The Zohar*. Trans. Harry Sperling and Maurice Simon. London: The Soncino Press, 1956. A second century writing attributed to Tanna Rabbi Simon Bar who spent thirteen years in a cave hiding from the Roman Army. *The Zohar*, which was written during Bar's period as a recluse, contains mystical teachings, legends, and divine emanations.

<sup>18</sup> Jack cites *George Sand, Oeuvres autobiographiques*, vol. I, ed. Geroges Lubin, (Paris, 1970-71), pp. 811-13, 839, as the source of this quote.

<sup>19</sup> Hades, Greek god of the underworld, abducted Persephone and held her captive. Her mother, Demeter, goddess of agriculture, refused to imbue the earth with vegetation if her daughter were not returned to her. Hades agreed to set Persephone free; however, he tricked the women by offering a pomegranate to his prisoner that caused her to return to the underworld for six months out of the year (251-63). Morford, Mark P.O. and Robert J. Lenardon. *Classical Mythology*. 5<sup>th</sup> ed. White Plains: Longman, 1995.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Minois, this is a line from the final scene of Alexandre Hardy's play *Scédase, ou L'hospitalité violée* (156).

<sup>21</sup> From "To his Mistress for her True Picture." Quoted in Guthke, Karl S. *The Gender of Death: A Cultural History in Art and Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999. 109.

<sup>22</sup> Jack cites *George Sand, Oeuvres autobiographiques*, vol. I, ed. Georges Lubin, (Paris, 1970-71), p. 1094, as the source of this quote.

<sup>23</sup> Jack cites *George Sand, Correspondence*, vol. IV, ed. Georges Lubin, (Paris, 1964-85), p. 219, as the source of this quote.

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